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Is McDonalds “eating” Confucius away?

Introduction

Recently it is possible to observe that strong emphasis is being put on revitalization of Confucian tradition – creating a harmonious, balanced world and society. There are many indicators proving that those efforts are also not meaningless for modern China policymakers – just to mention creation of Confucius Institute network, organizing big scholarly debates, conferences (for example this year Beijing World Sinologist Conference), etc.

However taking into consideration above mentioned efforts and social transformations in China one question arise: is it possible to maintain Confucian tradition in so quickly modernizing society?

This article is an attempt to give at least a partial answer to that rudimental question from perspective of studies of changes in eating and drinking behavior patterns in contemporary China or more precisely it as an attempt to answer the question: if (and if so to what extend) popularization of McDonald’s (especially among young Chinese) may influence (and simultaneously be an relevant indicator) changes in Chinese mentality.

For China studies scholars it is obvious that such concepts as social hierarchy, respect to the older and filial piety are crucial for Confucian tradition. In contemporary China while observing patterns of behavior in McDonald’s outlets one can easily note that children and youth usually are taking control over the interaction. It is rather a child who “orders” food, show parents how to eat hamburger or how they should behave after the meal (parents of grandparents quite often even do not know what to do in such weird place). Aren’t it is a sign of incompetence of “elders” in modern world and sign of their uselessness, backwardness etc. May it or may not change the shape of social strata? One may say that it is just meaningless example. But is it so in the country where people greet each other “Have you already been eating today?” (你吃饭了吗?).

Empirical and theoretical background

This article draws on the findings of an empirical study of eating and drinking behaviours in contemporary Beijing. The main idea of the project was to analyze the eating and drinking interaction patterns in the context of their role in creating, maintaining and changing the social bonds and hierarchy. The point of departure is that social hierarchy and social bonds are inextricably linked and that a lot of actions, which

seem irrelevant at first sight, fulfill a very important function in the creation and maintenance of social order. Central to the approach of the presented work is Goffman's (1972) work on *interaction ritual*.

Similarly, the research procedure and methodology are in strict relation to the interactional approach. More precisely, the project has been conducted under a strong influence of Glaser's and Strauss's (1967) grounded theory approach. Some remarks introduced by Strauss (1993) in his last book, *Continual Permutation of Actions*, were also relevant for formulation of the outputs and creation of the final theoretical model. Although the grounded theory allows using different material gathering methods, data derived from observations were the main source of research material. However, other data resources, such as interviews, books, newspapers, movies content etc., were also helpful.

Thus, the goal of this research project was to construct a system of interconnected categories, which could – as precisely as possible – describe the mechanism of creating, maintaining and changing the social bonds and hierarchy in everyday eating and drinking interactions.

The research was conducted in several sets of fieldwork activities from Winter 1999 through Spring 2004, and the results of it constitute the main part of my Ph.D. dissertation.

The *interaction rituals* can influence the group hierarchy and integrity in various ways. Some of them create (or change) the hierarchy by employing particular forms of competition – for example, strategically sophisticated *drinking game* and *toast games*. Others change the hierarchy through a voluntary action of one of higher status group members. Such person can appreciate or depreciate the prestige of their interaction partner. For example, when a lower status group member is invited by a *senior*, it will enhance their prestige. On the other hand, the same kind of behaviour can as well support the hierarchy order. For example, when a *senior* is being served by a younger family member, it is nothing more than *legitimization* of their position.

Most interaction rituals relating to the social hierarchy play also an important role in creating and maintaining the group integrity – such conventional behaviours reassure the social order stability, prevent uncontrolled conflicts etc.

For example, mutual and continual invitations for meals are a kind of competition, but at the same time, they create a very strong system of mutual obligations of the participants. Furthermore, while getting drunk in a drinking game results in one of the actors (the looser) *loose their face* and upgrades the status of the winner, the act of getting drunk mutually (simultaneously or at successive meetings) creates very strong bonds, based on the feeling of sharing the same experience – *we all have lost our face*.

Food and food-related ceremonies and etiquette were particularly important in Chinese tradition. In “*Chi” kua Zhongguo Zhongguo shi wenhua fansi (The Tragedy of Gourmandism Chewing over China's Food Culture)*, the Chinese author Li Bo (2004) accurately pointed out the importance of food culture (*yinshi wenhua*) in Chinese cultural context. In the title of one of the chapters, he even paraphrased the old Cartesian quotation *Cogito ergo sum* to *I eat therefore I am*.

In a similar, manner he refers to the social role of eating and drinking etiquette:

Chinese home education (*jiajiao*) is based on the assumption that if one does not receive proper lessons of discipline and etiquette at home, they will face trouble after leaving their parents’ home (*chumen*). The so-called *home education* is mainly focused on eating and drinking rituals.

[...] Everyday eating etiquette reminds you: you have to keep to the rules; you have to keep and maintain your position [...]. It is therefore possible to say that table manners and social hierarchy are inextricably linked [...] (Li, 2004, pp. 69–70).

Children and youth social status in Confucian traditional system

Confucianism during its thousands years of history undoubtedly fulfilled a crucial role in creation and maintenance of Chinese social organization system. In this ethical and philosophical approach whole society, political apparatus of the whole empire is a reflection of family organization. Family institution in traditional China was not based on the emotional bonds but rather on the system of hierarchical relations, which is presumed as natural. Thus son social status is lower than his parents, wife’s social status is lower than husband, youth social status is lower than that of elders and going a bit further, subject is inferior in relation with ruler (Künstler, 1983, p. 129).

The most important is relation between son and his parents. Most important obligation of the son is filial piety (*kao*). Any individual to not become a “mean person” (*xiaoren*) has to follow the virtue path (*daode*). To achieve this he has to look after his parents in the way and to the extent sometimes unimaginable for contemporary Westerners.

Meng Yi asked what filial piety was. The Master said, “It is not being disobedient.” [...] Fan chi said, “What did it mean?” The Master replied, “Parents when alive should be served according to propriety, when dead they should be buried according to propriety and when they dead should be receiving sacrifice according to propriety” (Lun Yu, 1992, Book 2, section 2.5).

Mengwu asked what filial piety is. The Master said, “Children should feel seek if parents are only anxious” (Book 2, section 2.6).

The years of parents may by no means not to be kept in the memory, as an occasion at once for joy and for fear (Book 4, section 2.21).

Above mentioned examples clearly indicate that in this philosophical and (or) ethical system elders were established at the top of the social hierarchy, they were supposed to receive all signs of respect, attention and care. Moreover, the most important religious duty was to perform proper ceremonies in honor of ancestors. Confucianism definitely was a conservative system where perfect Golden Age has already gone and the main goal of society it is rather to return to the “perfect paradise of the past” than to entry “the glorious path of progress.”

Food and hierarchy

Confucian values and norms (as well as other normative system) have found their reflection in everyday life behavior patterns – including eating and drinking habits as well. There is no doubt that in traditional China social position of children and youth during the meal was quite low. Let me just give an James Watson's (2000) example concerning social position of New Territories peasants family children at 60s and 70s of 20th century:

Elders, man and women over 60 sui (lunar reckoning of years), dominated the ritual life of the community; children, by contrast, were almost completely ignored...

The only parties focusing on children were "full month" (**manyue**) banquets held to mark infant survival for 30 days after birth. The newborn may have been the focus of attention, but the celebrants were exclusively.

Children who congregated at village banquets were tolerated as onlookers but were not treated as guests (seats were not reserved for them at tables) (Watson, 2000, pp. 204–205).

Eating and drinking interactions provide many indicators of social actor status position. The most clear one is above mentioned right of the individual to participate at meal. If actor is not allowed to take a part in the meal, or may take a part, but is not allowed to seat around the table, it is a clear indicator of his or her lower hierarchical status.

Quality and prestige of the food individual is allowed to eat is another factor. In every culture some of the food products are considered to be more prestigious¹ (in China fish, sea food and meat). More prestigious food is usually eaten by people whose status is higher in the group hierarchy. Social actor's right to choose food (for example from round table) or to order dishes (in restaurants) may be also considered as hierarchy indicator.

The last group of hierarchy indicators is associated with behavior patterns during the meal. There is big diversity of ritualized behavior which concerns hierarchical position of individual during the interaction. It is not my goal to describe all that tools in such short article, however it seems to be useful to provide here few examples before I start analyze of situation in contemporary China.

First of all it is very significant who takes first turn in the meal. Usually it is the head of the family or honorable guest who should start the meal, thus priority in turn taking is an indicator of the status. It is also important who is serving (who pours tea and alcohol into the cups, who is cleaning utensils, etc.) during the meal and who is being served. For example traditionally during family dinner women usually (wife) was serving the man what maybe perceived as an indicator of her lower status. There are dozens of others indicators of status during the this type of interaction, just to mention if somebody has a right to take an active part in the conversation, to take food by himself, seating arrangement, etc.

¹ For an excellent analyze of *haute cuisine* concept please see: J. Goody, *Food, Cuisine and Class*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982.

Situation in contemporary China

As I’ve already mentioned traditionally children were not allowed to take a part in any feast. Moreover, any parties usually weren’t celebrating anniversaries of the child but rather of elders. Two, three decades before such rules concern both urban and rural areas even in highly developed Hong Kong.

Hong Kong children rarely ate outside their home until the late 1970s, and when they did, they were expected to eat what was put in front of them. The idea that children might actually order their own food or speak to a waiter would have outraged most adults; only foreign youngsters (notably the offsprings of British and American expatriates) were permitted to make their preferences known in public (Watson, 1997, p. 100).

Surprisingly situation is not completely different in contemporary China. As I’ve observed in countryside areas (surroundings of Wutaishan – Hebei province) it was very seldom to see situations where children and adults were eating together. Actually quite often it was only the head of the family sitting around the table, sometimes accompanied by his wife and guests. Other members of the family usually have been approaching the table, taking food and then sitting aside. Sitting around the same table were usually perceived as a sign of being positioned on more or less the same level of social strata.

In most of the restaurants in interior of the country children were not present during the meal. That situation differs a little bit in big modern metropolises but even there it was unusual to see situation as described by Watson:

During the summer of 1994, while attending a business lunch in one of Hong Kong’s fanciest hotels, I watched a waiter lean down to consult with a customer at an adjoining table. The object of his attention was a six-year-old child who studied the menu with practiced skill (Watson, 1997, p. 100).

Usually in traditional Chinese restaurant children were (even if participating in the meal) sitting quietly, not undertaking any kind of self-inducted activities. Adults were keeping control over the interaction – they were ordering dishes, chatting, asking children to eat food which were supposed to be good for them, etc.

Considering above mentioned remarks it could be said that in China still exists strong coherency between Confucian values, social hierarchy and eating and drinking behavior patterns. If it would be so, the question which was brought up in the introduction to this article could become irrelevant. “Fortunately” interactions usually looked quite differently in American fast food restaurants chains, such as McDonalds, KFC, Pizza Hut, etc.

There were three major differences in behavior patterns in traditional Chinese restaurants and in fast food outlets: Quite often family (four grandparents, two parents and “small emperors/empresses”) gathered in fast food outlets to celebrate children birthday.

Children quite often were ordering food. In such cases (nevertheless if it was celebration or just family dinner) children quite actively were taking a part in the interactions.

Social meaning and possible repercussions

According to research theoretical approach these differences, except of providing some ethnographical data, may be treated as a perfect source of information (indicator) helpful for further analyze of hierarchy changes within Chinese family. Children birthday parties, their right to order the food and allowance to take an active part in the interaction all this provide us with information that social position of child is now much higher. Additional arguments supporting this interpretation may be found in Yunxiang Yan (1997) article concerning McDonalds in contemporary Beijing.

I once interviewed a middle-aged woman whose daughter had just won an essay contest at McDonald's. She told me that she did not like the taste of hamburgers, and their husband simply hated them. But their daughter loved hamburgers and milk shakes so much so their family had to visit McDonald's nearly every week (Yan, 1997, p. 51).

Thus is not a rare feature that adults do not like the food which is served in fast food restaurants but they are coming there on the regularly to satisfy their children. Additionally especially for low budget families family meal at McDonalds is quite a big financial enterprise, cost is much higher than a really good food in cheap local Chinese restaurant;

As one man, a worker, noted although his salary did not allow him to eat out, when his son asked him to go to McDonalds he never said No. [...]

It should be noted that eating at McDonald's is still a big treat for low-income people (Yan, 1997, pp. 51–52).

In such places children not only are taking a part in the meals but quite often the only reason why the meal has been taking place in fast food restaurants is to satisfy their wishes – it maybe normal family meal or “children” birthday celebration, etc.² Moreover, children usually take control over the interaction, they decide what family is going to eat, are taking actively a part in the conversation, etc.

Change of behavior patterns possesses strong social significance *per se*. To support this statement I'd like to refer to Peter Berger's (1967) concepts concerning creation of social reality of the individual. Berger states that every person, when constructing their own *legitimization of social world* (basis of his identity, *self*), needs to create a kind of mechanism, which he calls *plausibility structure*. Such structure is very ephemeral because people forgetting things very quickly, therefore to maintain such basis it is necessary to *remind* them it frequently. He finds this *reminding* institution to be one of the oldest and most important tools of maintaining social reality and simultaneously considers the religious ritual as relevant tool of *reminding* (Berger, 1967, pp. 74–75).

Berger refers mainly to formal, religious ritual. In my research I was not particularly interested in the symbolic meanings of rituals. I have rather focused on its functions. From such perspective it doesn't matter whether ritual is performed in church (and refers, for example, to an idea of holy love) or it is just one of interaction rituals

² Taking into account its contrast with traditional values such phenomena may be treated as indicator of strong changes in hierarchical structure of Chinese family *per se*.

(Goffman, 1972) such as offering somebody a bowl of rice. Furthermore I presume that rituals functions, nevertheless if it is formal or interactional, are more or less similar. From such perspective Berger’s thesis can be broadened to all ceremonial behavior including interaction rituals as well. If it is so then performance of any kind of interaction rituals fulfills particular functions in creating *plausibility structure* and furthermore plays a significant role in creating and maintaining structure of social world, values and norms of any individual.

Consequently transformation of interaction rituals patterns may bring significant changes to normative system in the whole society. Traditional Chinese eating and drinking *habitus* supports lower social position of children. Offsprings were usually completely excluded from interaction. Children status was so low that even a possibility of having a meal together with their parents could be perceived as something extraordinary, as a sign of attention and honor. Nobody even thought that child could order dishes in the restaurants. Behavior patterns in contemporary urban China seem to be more appreciating children and youth social status: they are more frequently present at the family meals, quite often are eating together with adults even in traditional Chinese restaurants. However the most significant changes have occurred in fast food restaurants such as McDonald’s. At this moment it is difficult to say if in nearest future such changes will also become common in other types of restaurants. However account mentioned above Hong Kong example from Watson’s (1997) books seems to support such hypothesis. Furthermore if new patterns of behavior would become more universal it will definitely fulfill more important functions in changing hierarchy structure in Chinese society.

Another important phenomenon, which may stimulate social changes, is fact that children often play an expert role while eating in McDonalds. They usually give advices to adults: how they should behave, what it is possible to eat there, how to order food and how consumption should look like. Most of that knowledge comes from different mass media sources (see: Guo, 2000, pp. 102–104, 112–113), peer groups chatting, etc. (see: Chee, 2000, pp. 52–54).

Such phenomena may be interpreted in cultural competency context. Adults when coming to McDonalds often do not know what to eat and how to behave there. Simultaneously these restaurants are considered to be quite fashionable and modern (which is a key world in contemporary China). Thus when adults are showing their lack of competence in such highly esteemed places children may start to consider themselves as much more culturally competent, up to date, which finally may lead towards their self appreciation and depreciation of the image of elders. Now child may think: “grandpa doesn’t know anything, what he can teach me, even do not knowing how to eat hamburgers, not mentioning how to use computers or Internet.”

Week after week such cognitive scheme may be start to modify “plausibility structure” of Chinese youth and therefore perform an important role in Chinese youth mentality changes. It seems to be even more important if we take into account that this phenomena concerns children and is taking place in their primary socialization period – most important part human being socialization. Moreover, in that period food related sphere is one of the most important parts of young human being behavior, the younger individual is the bigger part of his activities concerns food.

Therefore if child is getting used to the fact that may decide what to eat, where to eat and what's most important that adults are "not up to date" it may helps to establish quite new approach towards elders – instead of respect, rather belief of own superiority. Thus Jing (2000) probably was correct stating that in China "old longevity goddess" ("laoshouxing") are become being replaced by "small longevity goddess" ("xiaoshouxing").

Youth, *Ziyou* and Americana

In former part of this article I focused mainly on the problem if (and is so, how) popularization of McDonalds restaurants in modern China may change and (or) disintegrate old system of Confucian values through it influence on children behavior and perception. It is worth to mention that except of its popularity among children, eating at McDonalds is also very fashionable among Chinese youth. It is perceived as a good place to chat in bigger companion and as a perfect location for romantic date. Why such place, usually not associated with comfort and romance, gain such reputation in China?

To answer this question it could be useful to refer one more time to the Confucian concept of "kao" (filial piety).

Such [...] set of duties is not based on [...] the emotional feeling but rather on system of particular moral norms. To be in accordance with those norms one need to behave according to the rite (li). It means that one need to perform (in strictly described situations and time) strictly prescribed acts, gestures, all what is usually called ritual or etiquette. [...] Li is crucial construct which describe boundaries of loyalty and sincerity, allows to constrain human behavior to particular limits. [...]

Another aspect of this system is fact that ritual (or rather etiquette) seems to be creating hierarchy most powerful factor – in family and broader in the whole society. It creates a social distance between the people, establishes (in particular situations and time) proper place for any individual (Künstler, 1983, pp. 129–130).

On the first sight it seems to be obvious that such system leaves little space left for social actor individuality. Anyone is perfectly established in sophisticated systems of dependence, norms, commitment and hierarchy. Definitely it helps an individual to feel safety in the society but not to be independent.

Such system if compared to liberal, western one seems to be conservative and dogmatic. May be also perceived as an moral and ideological prison – especially for those who were (in some way) depreciated by Confucian system (among others children, youth and women).

Until beginnings of Deng Xiaoping's open door policy traditional Confucians ethic system was the only "symbolic universe" Chinese could choose. However after beginning of socio-economic reform new sets of products, values and ideas came to China. Simultaneously part of Chinese populations (mainly big metropolises inhabitants) were able to experience new *universum* personally. It was April 1992 when McDonalds open its first outlet in Beijing (just two years after opening the very first outlet in China – in Shenzhen nearby Hongkong). From the beginning of its presence in China McDonalds was perceived not only as another type of restaurant but rather as an ambassador of

American culture. And this culture is perceived by big part of Chinese youth as a symbol of freedom, personal independence, cowboy individuality, as a symbol of new ideal – personal independency (*ziyou*).

[...] McDonald’s experience has less to do with food than it does with a chance to explore American culture... (Yan, 1997, p. 52).

Eating in fast food restaurants gives a possibility to experience personally Western, American culture – exotic, modern culture of the success and freedom.

Other news items associate the success of transnational food chains with their atmosphere of equality and democracy. No matter who you are, according to one of these reports, you will be treated with warmth and friendliness in the fast food restaurants; hence many people patronize McDonald’s to experience a moment of equality (Yan, 1997, p. 52).

Yunxiang Yan is suggesting in his article that McDonalds helps poorer customers to feel equal to other clients because of limited choice of dishes and not big difference in prices. Rich customer cannot choose something which is too expensive for other client, which quite possible in traditional restaurants (for example ordering seafood). It reduces a risk of poorer host to loose face during the interaction.³ Consequently everybody is served (or rather not served – author commentary) in the same way so in some sense everybody is equal.

I’d like to broaden a bit this interpretation. First of all possibility of eating something not domestic (*yang*) makes Chinese client closer to the Western world and may be treated as a value *per se*. Secondly eating in McDonalds gives social actors little possibility to perform any kind of ritualized behavior, which could create or maintain social hierarchy. Eating there is highly individualized, clients usually are eating their only theirs portion, there is little chance of performing any kind of ritual. Thirdly the fast food managers are clearly aware whose attraction they may turn on. In outlets traditionally “depreciated” groups such as youth, children and women are appreciated. In almost any McDonalds there is children corner and in quite lot of the outlets are places for romantic date (Yun, 1997, pp. 61–64).

In this way again popularity of fast food chains among Chinese youth may be treated as an indicator of idea of individualization and independency (*ziyou*) widespreading. Simultaneously establishment of new ways of eating patterns may be may be considered as transforming symbolic universe tool and catalyst of deeper socio-cultural changes.

Summary

The main goal of this article was provide answer to the question: Do efforts aimed at revitalization of Confucian tradition have any chance to succeed?

³ Not very wealthy host would loose face in such situation because his disability to order an expensive dish could be perceived as lack of hospitality.

Of course this short article cannot fully answer this question. However observations described in this article may provide interesting data for further consideration and studies. I think that at this moment it is already possible to formulate several hypothesis and ask few more questions. First of all, taking into account phenomena describe in this article, I presume that it maybe quite difficult to “protects” traditional Confucian values system *en tout*. Several questions (or doubts) regarding that problem arise at once: Would children like to show a respect to their parents or grandparents if “elders” even do not know how to behave in McDonalds, not mentioning how to use computers?

Is it possible to maintain the tradition in the world where children love everything which is new, exotic and modern?

Is it possible to “protect” old Confucian social system values if youth is much more attracted by ideas of *ziyou* and treats McDonald’s as an “agent of American freedom?”

Personally I doubt if it is possible to maintain and protect “pure” Confucian tradition. It is much more probable that China will step further on the path of globalization, modernization and social and economic transformations. In such world there is little space left for tradition, rites and elders. Progress is only what matters. In such case elders as keepers of the old values are not needed anymore and their experience seems to be useless. Etiquette cannot be so important if each day one has to deal in new circumstances with different people from different cultures.

Of course it doesn’t mean that the entire Confucians heritage stands in the opposition to the global processes of contemporary world. Probably it would be possible, useful and good (also for Western world) to keep and promote ideas of harmony, golden mean, virtue men, *daode*, etc. These concepts, although are immanent part of Confucian tradition, do not constitute all of it. It is obvious that it would be very difficult to talk about Confucianism not mentioning ideas of *kao*, *li* and hierarchy? Thus maybe it is a time to create new system, based on Confucian tradition, but adapted to the new world circumstances. Maybe we can called it post-neo-Confucianism, maybe globalized Confucianism – one is quite sure – in modern world is little space for old classical Confucianism – not because it is bad system but because it does not fit to the reality.

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